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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to compare students' recreational reading levels to their independent, instructional, and frustrational levels determinable with an informal reading inventory. Subjects, 20 second grade and 20 fifth grade students, were administered the Basic Reading Inventory. In addition, the school's librarian recorded titles of four books chosen by each student within a 2-month period. These books were freely selected and the children did not know that their choices were being monitored. After the books had been returned to the library, researchers estimated the books' difficulty level with the Fry Readability Graph. Results showed that second grade students selected books for recreational reading within their independent reading level 42% of the time, within their instructional level 25% of the time, and at their frustration level 33% of the time. Fifth grade students, on the other hand, selected books for recreational reading within their independent reading level 42% of the time, within their instructional level 32% of the time, and at their frustration level 26% of the time. When they could select books to read for pleasure, both second and fifth grade students selected books above their independent level 58% of the time. These results indicate that it is inappropriate for educators to prescribe the level of books read for pleasure based on an informal reading inventory. (HOD)

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LOCATING THE RECREATIONAL LEVEL OF ELEMENTARY GRADE STUDENTS

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When a child pulls a book off the library shelf for recreational reading, what is he considering -- length? jacket appeal? difficulty level? relation to his experiential background? All of these probably enter into his consideration of the selection. The determining factor, however, for a freely chosen book, is quite likely to be the interest level of that selection for a particular child (Breen, 1967). Teachers acknowledge the importance of a motivating interest when they teach a directed reading lesson or prepare a child for an Informal Reading Inventory selection. Advocates of individualized reading programs have long stressed the importance of the interest factor in the child's self-selection of reading materials.

When a child selects a book for purely pleasure reading, to what difficulty level does the book correspond? It is not difficult to find writers suggesting that a child's recreational reading level should be the same as, or at least based upon, his independent reading level as identified by an Informal Reading Inventory.

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Several published IRI's (Ekwall, 1979; Johns, 1981; Silvaroli, 1982) equate the IRI's independent level with the level at which a child should read books for leisure reading. Betts (1946) describes his basal level (which corresponds to the more recent IRI-designated independent level) as "the level at which 'free', supplementary, independent, or extensive reading can be done successfully" (p. 446). In A Dictionary of Reading and Related Terms (1981) the independent level is described as the level "especially useful" when selecting material for leisure reading.

In his Diagnostic Reading Scales (1972), Spache describes that level at which to choose recreational reading materials as being *higher* than the instructional level and one which can be influenced by experience and interest. Powell (1971), on the other hand, speculates that the independent level is not static, but "floats."

Several research studies have tried to correlate recreational or independent reading choices with cloze levels. Breen (1967) investigated the choices of students involved in an individualized reading program and found that over 50 percent of the students did not select materials at an instructional level; 25 percent consistently chose materials which were at the frustration level. Ferguson (1977) studied the trade books freely selected by a group of sixth graders and used a cloze test to determine the level of difficulty of the books chosen; (the cloze tests were administered before the children were allowed to read the books.) The resulting data revealed that more than 50 percent of the students tested by cloze procedures scored at or above the independent level, while

35 percent of those involved chose books at their instructional level. Stockton (1982) compared the recreational reading choices of Title I and Honor Roll junior high students. She found that 75 percent of the Title I students chose books at their frustration level, as compared with 12 percent of the Honor Roll students (4-8).

Belloni and Jongsma (1978) gave low-achieving seventh grade students limited choices of widely-ranged material. They found that the students better comprehended material that they considered highly interesting than material they rated as having low interest value.

While there are some who believe that a child's recreational reading is generally done at a level higher than the independent level, we were able to find no references in the literature to either substantiate or refute the equating of a recreational level with that of the independent level. Prompted by the thinking of those who do not view recreational reading as a limiting endeavor, in terms of difficulty levels, and realizing that interest and motivation are not variables generally assessed with an Informal Reading Inventory, we decided to conduct a study regarding the recreational reading level.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study was to compare recreational reading levels in relation to the independent, instructional, and frustration levels determinable with an Informal Reading Inventory.

PROCEDURE

For the purposes of our study, 20 second graders and 20 fifth graders from an elementary school in a southeastern state, were

selected to participate. The Basic Reading Invertory (Johns, 1981) was administered to each student to help determine his/her independent, instructional, and frustration reading levels. Powell's (1978) differentiated criteria were then used to determine those levels.

Within a two-month period, the school's librarian kept track of the ensuing four books chosen by each student. Those books were freely selected; the children did not know that their choices were being monitored. After the books had been returned to the library, the researchers estimated the books' difficulty level with the Fry Readability Graph (1977). (The Fry Graph was used because it was one of the means employed to estimate the readability levels of the Basic Reading Inventory.) By this means, we estimated the difficulty level of the books chosen for recreational reading by each child.

It was not unusual to observe that three of a student's recreational choices fell within two or three graded levels of each other, while the fourth was often four to seven graded levels higher than the others! Because we had experienced book selection based on an appealing title or other initial stimulus, when indeed the book was much too difficult to enjoy, it was decided to use only three freely chosen books for comparison. The book farthest from the other three in terms of readability level was eliminated from the study.

SUBJECTS

While 29 second graders were administered the Basic Reading

Inventory, only 20 (9 girls, 11 boys) were used in the study. The 9 students were eliminated because they read at such a low level that neither an independent nor an instructional level could be determined for them. All 20 (8 girls, 12 boys) fifth graders to whom the Basic Reading Inventory had been administered were used in the study.

RESULTS

Second grade students selected books for recreational reading within their independent reading level 42 percent of the time, within their instructional level 25 percent of the time, and at their frustration level 33 percent of the time (see Figure 1).

Fifth grade students selected books for recreational reading within their independent level 42 percent of the time, within their instructional level 32 percent of the time, and at their frustration level 26 percent of the time.

Both second and fifth grade students, when they could select books to read for pleasure, selected books above their independent level 58 percent of the time.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of our study was to determine whether students who had the opportunity to select their own library books for recreational reading would select books at their independent reading level. Or, as others have argued, would the students choose books at higher levels due to such variables, perhaps, as personal experience, interest, and motivation? Based on the information

gathered in this study, it appears that recreational reading varies so much that it is not legitimate to even discuss a recreational reading level and certainly not as its being synonymous with the independent reading level. The second and fifth grade students in our study selected books for recreational reading above the independent level 58 percent of the time.

Powell (1971) may be correct in his statement that there is no empirical data to support the ranking nor the limits of the independent reading level. It is sometimes below, sometimes at, and sometimes above the instructional reading level. Interest, value, motivation, and/or background for what is being read may very well be the main determinant(s) for a so-called recreational reading level. Wrightstone and others (1957) have stated that "a child does not read for instructional or independent purposes. He reads to fulfill personal purposes of his own. If given the opportunity to choose books which satisfy a purpose for him, he often goes from a difficult book to an easy book and back again to a challenging book."

Since reading for pleasure is so personal, it is the opinion of the authors that it is inappropriate for educators to base statements about the difficulty level of books students should select for recreational reading on an Informal Reading Inventory's results.

FIGURE 1

Percent of books for recreational reading selected by second and fifth grade students at their various reading levels.

	INDEPENDENT	INSTRUCTIONAL	FRUSTRATION
SECOND GRADE	42	25	33
FIFTH GRADE	42	32	26

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